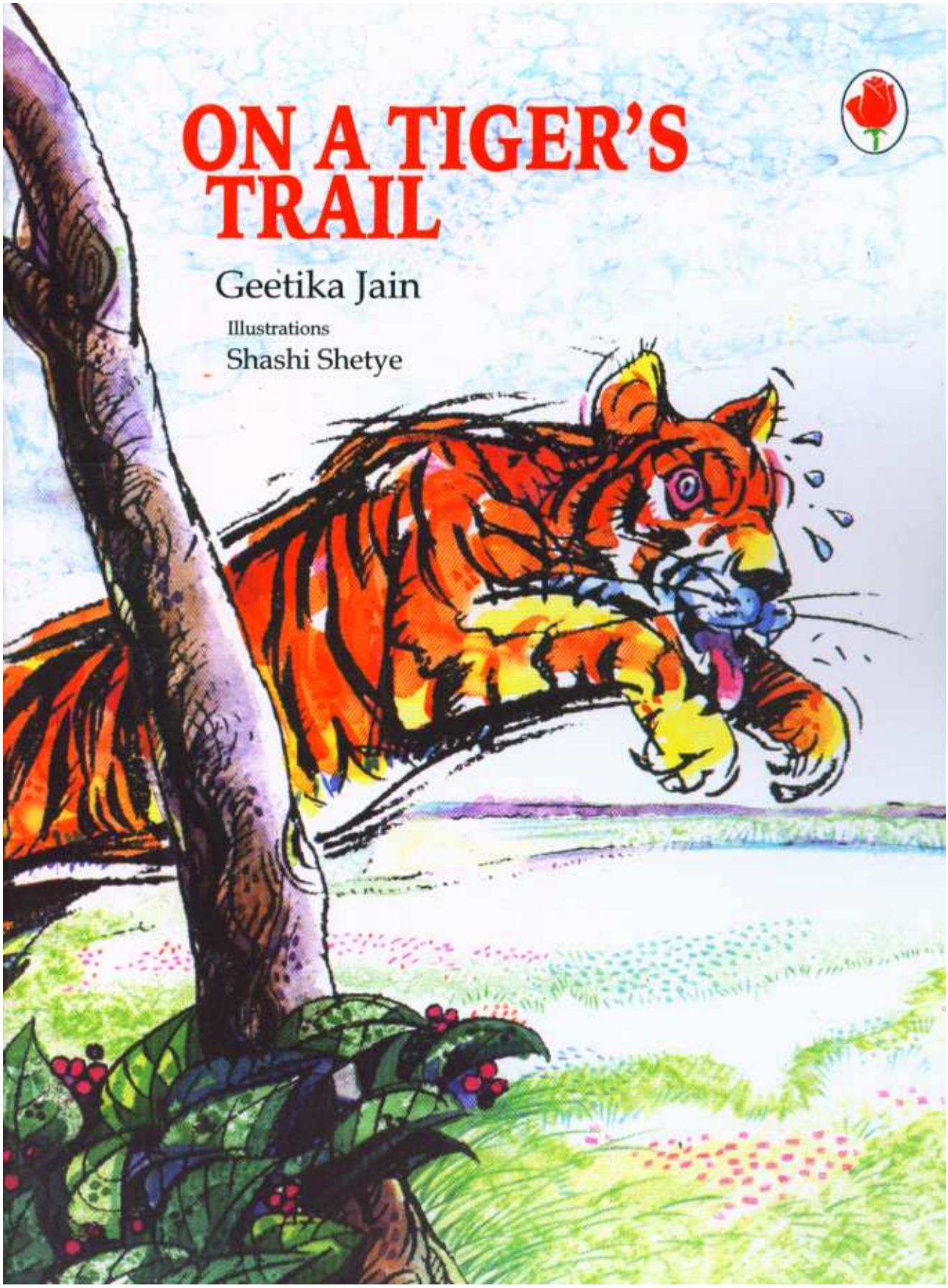
ON A TIGER'S TRAIL

Geetika Jain

Illustrations
Shashi Shetye



ISBN 978-81-237-5427-7

First Edition 2009
Reprints 2010, 2011 (twice) (*Saka* 1932)

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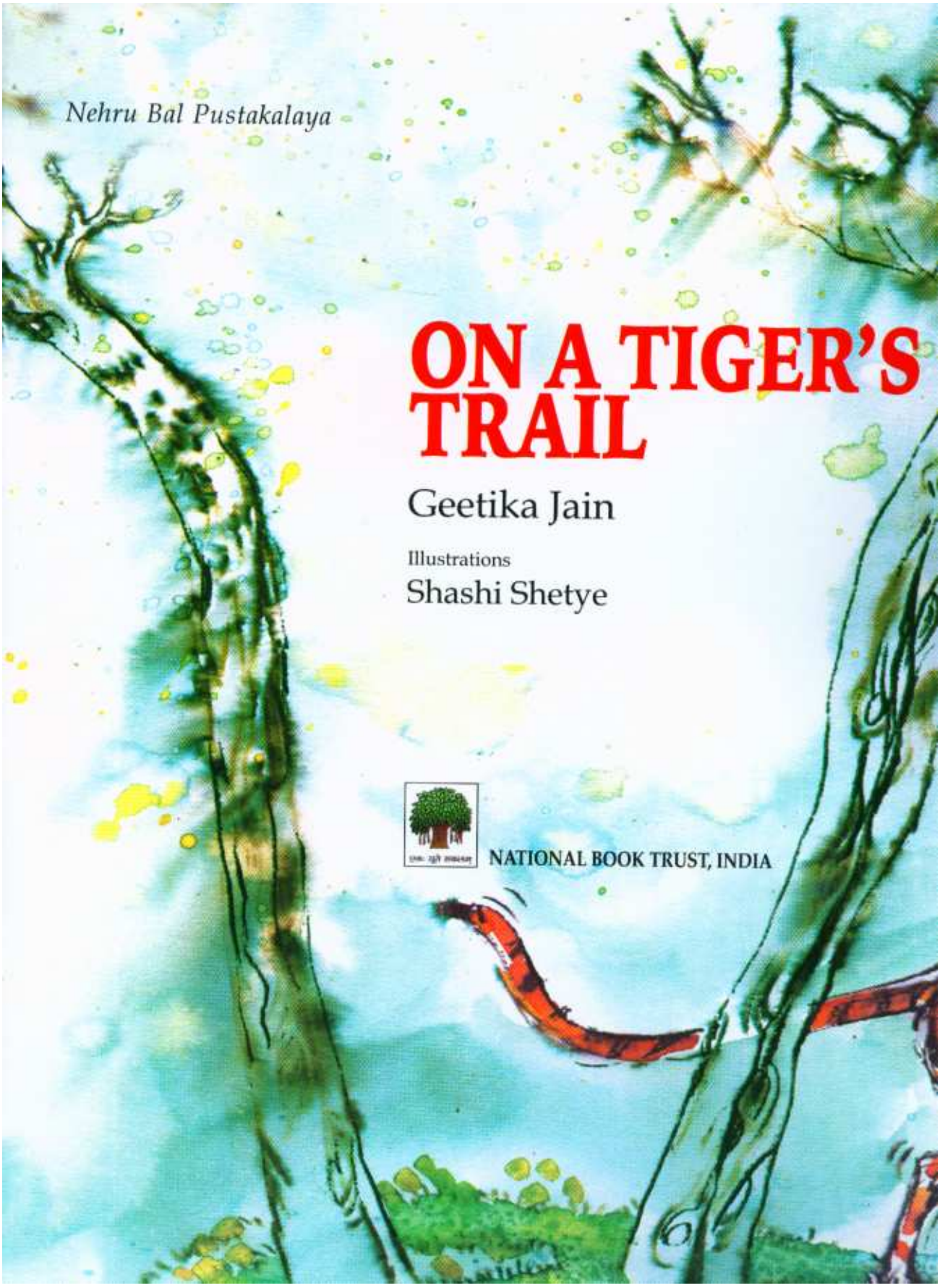
₹ 35.00

Published by the Director, National Book Trust, India
Nehru Bhawan, 5 Institutional Area, Phase-II
Vasant Kunj, New Delhi-110 070


Nehru Bal Pustakalaya
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NATIONAL BOOK TRUST, INDIA

Maya lived with her mother and brother in a little hut located at the edge of the forest.

One day Maya returned home to find her mother in tears. A tiger had carried her brother off into the forest.

"I'll go after him and bring him back," said Maya consoling her sick mother.

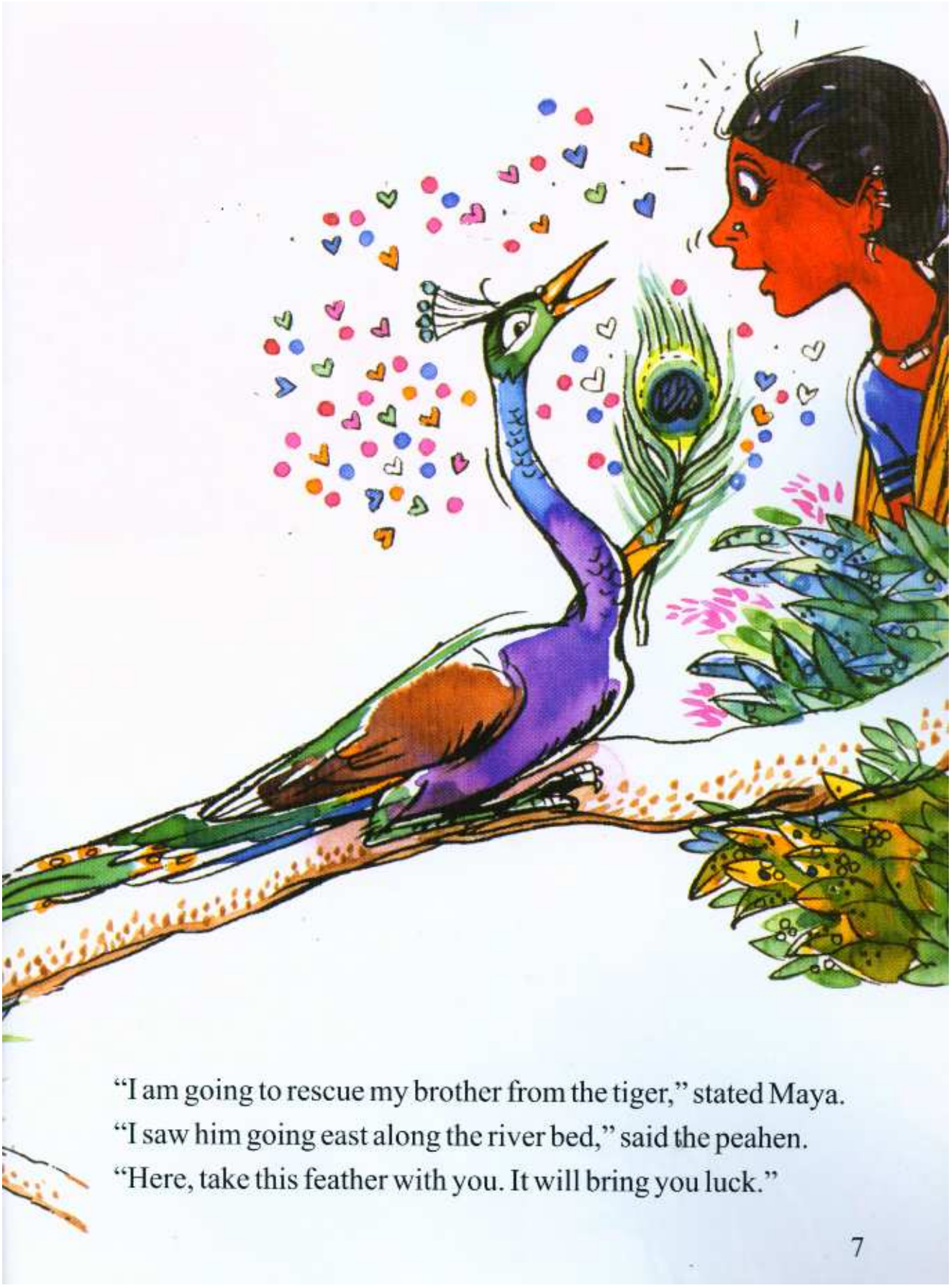
"Take this anklet with you," answered her mother, "it will bring you luck."

Maya followed the tiger's trail through the wheat fields into the forest. It was dark and silent inside the forest but Maya was not afraid. Suddenly she heard the shrieks of peacock chicks and went over to their nest.

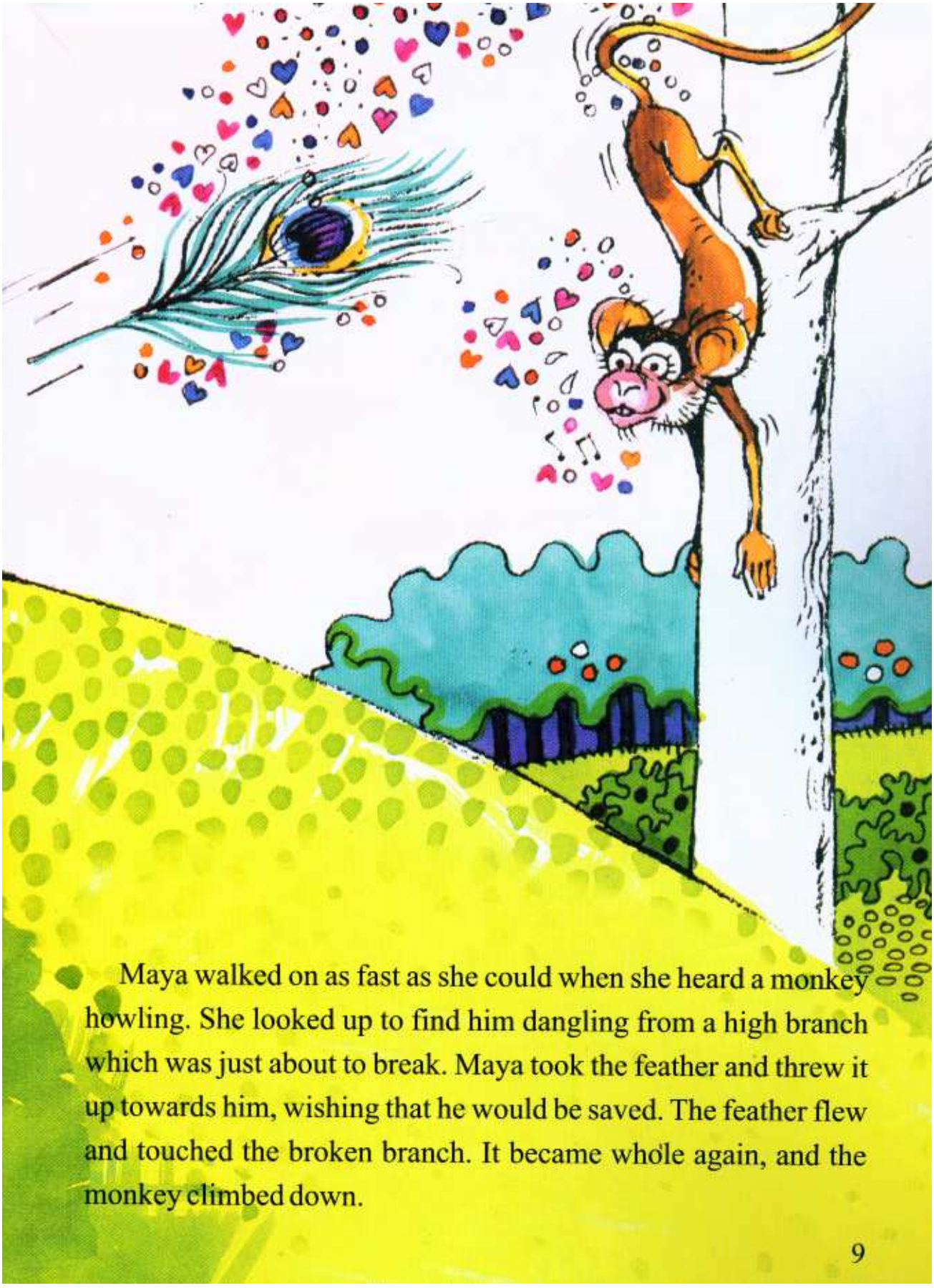
"Help us!" they cried. "Our mother has not returned. She must have lost her way!"

Forgetting her own troubles, Maya placed the precious anklet on the nest and wished that their mother would come back. Its tiny bells began to jingle and their sound guided the peahen home.

"Thank you for helping me," said the peahen pleased with Maya. "But who are you and where are you going?"



"I am going to rescue my brother from the tiger," stated Maya.
"I saw him going east along the river bed," said the peahen.
"Here, take this feather with you. It will bring you luck."



Maya walked on as fast as she could when she heard a monkey howling. She looked up to find him dangling from a high branch which was just about to break. Maya took the feather and threw it up towards him, wishing that he would be saved. The feather flew and touched the broken branch. It became whole again, and the monkey climbed down.

"Bless you, little girl!" he beamed. "What are you doing here alone?"

"I am going to rescue my brother from the tiger," she replied, "I must hurry."

"Oh!" claimed the monkey, "I heard him roaring from that direction." He pointed to the acacia trees at a distance. "Here, take this pomegranate. It will help you in your mission!"

Maya's feet carried her swiftly through the woods. All of a sudden she came upon a deer that was stamping and snorting. It had been caught in the thorns, and couldn't shake loose. One look at the struggling deer and Maya held out her pomegranate wishing to set it free. The pomegranate burst open and its seeds, like a hundred shooting stars, broke away the thorns. The deer was free and safe.

"You must have come from heaven," he thanked her.

"I am searching for the tiger," explained Maya, "he has carried off my brother. Have you seen him?"

"I caught a whiff of his scent in the tall grass," disclosed the deer.

"Take this flower. It will help you."

Maya plodded on through the grass. Soon she came to a meadow where a wild boar was grunting miserably.

"Help me!" he cried, "I have grown old and lost my sense of smell. I have not been able to find any roots and tubers to dig up. I shall die of hunger."

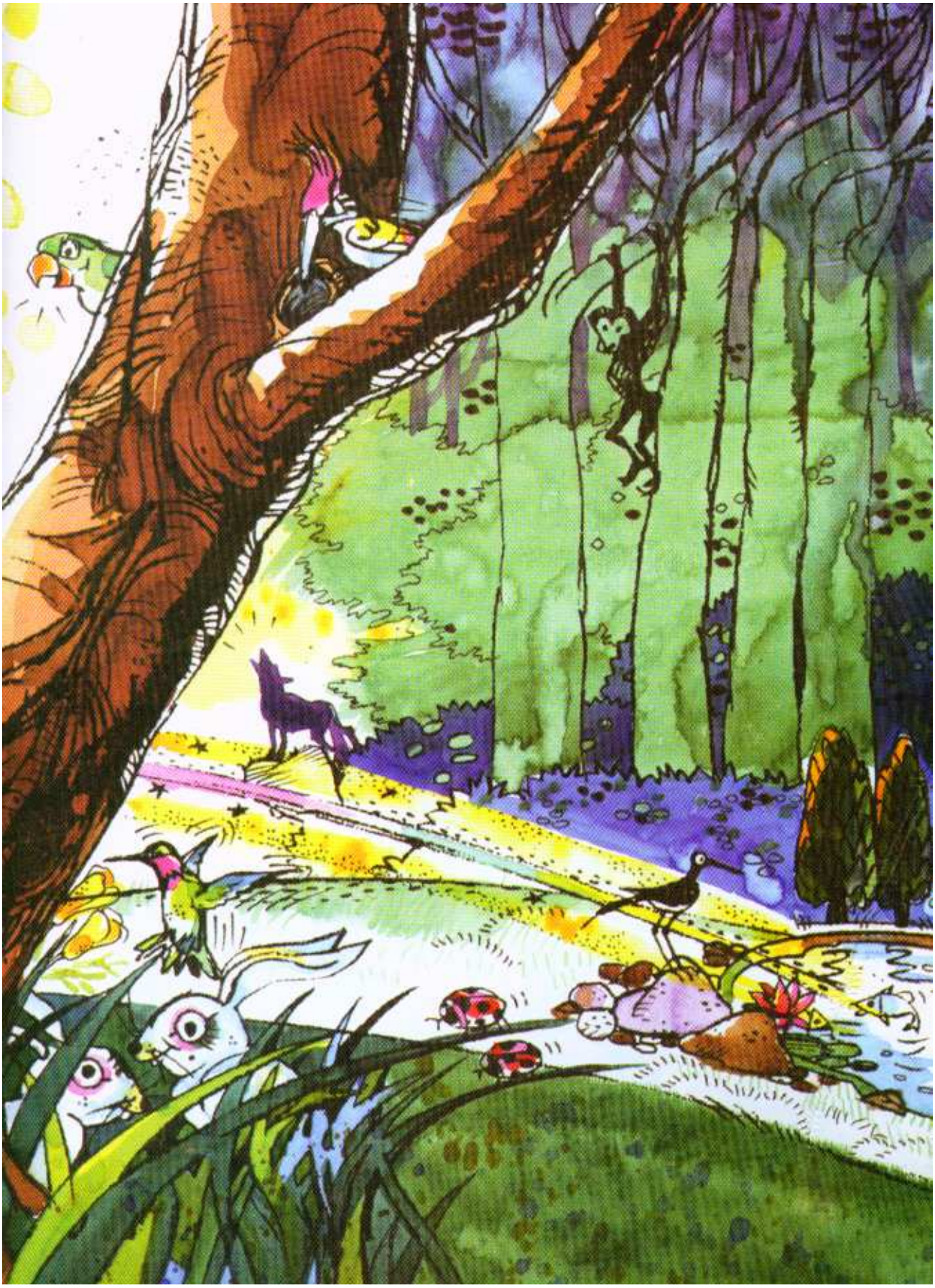
In a flash, Maya put the flower to his nose. Its strong aroma went deep into his nostrils and revived his sense of smell.

He squealed in delight as he caught the whiff of some sweet potatoes. "How can I thank you?"

Maya enquired if he had seen the dreadful tiger which had carried her brother off.

"I saw his pug marks by the lotus pond. You must hurry before it is too late! Here take this diamond with you. I found it deep in the earth. It will bring you luck," said the boar.

Maya ran all the way to the pond. There, she saw some fish thrashing about in misery.



"Please, please help us! The pond has dried up, and without water we shall die," they pleaded.

Maya wasted no time. She tossed the diamond in the pond and wished for water. The diamond bored a deep hole in the ground, and soon the spring water gushed up to fill the pond.

The fish were overjoyed. "You have a heart of gold," they announced, "what are you doing in the middle of the forest?"

Maya again explained how her brother had been carried away by a savage tiger.

"You are not far from him. The tiger lives just beyond that hill. Here, please take this shell. It will help you."

As Maya was climbing the hill, she heard the panic-stricken trumpet of an elephant. She could see only the tip of his trunk. The rest of his body was trapped in a ditch!

No matter how hard he tried, he could not climb out. Maya's heart missed a beat. She put the shell in the pit, wishing that the elephant would come out. The shell fell to the bottom of the pit. There it grew and grew till the elephant's feet were all on it. Then it came up higher and higher, lifting the elephant clear out of the pit.

"Thank you for saving my life dear one! A hunter had dug that pit. Soon he would have come to kill me for my tusks," panted the elephant, a little out of breath.

Maya told him about the tiger and her brother.

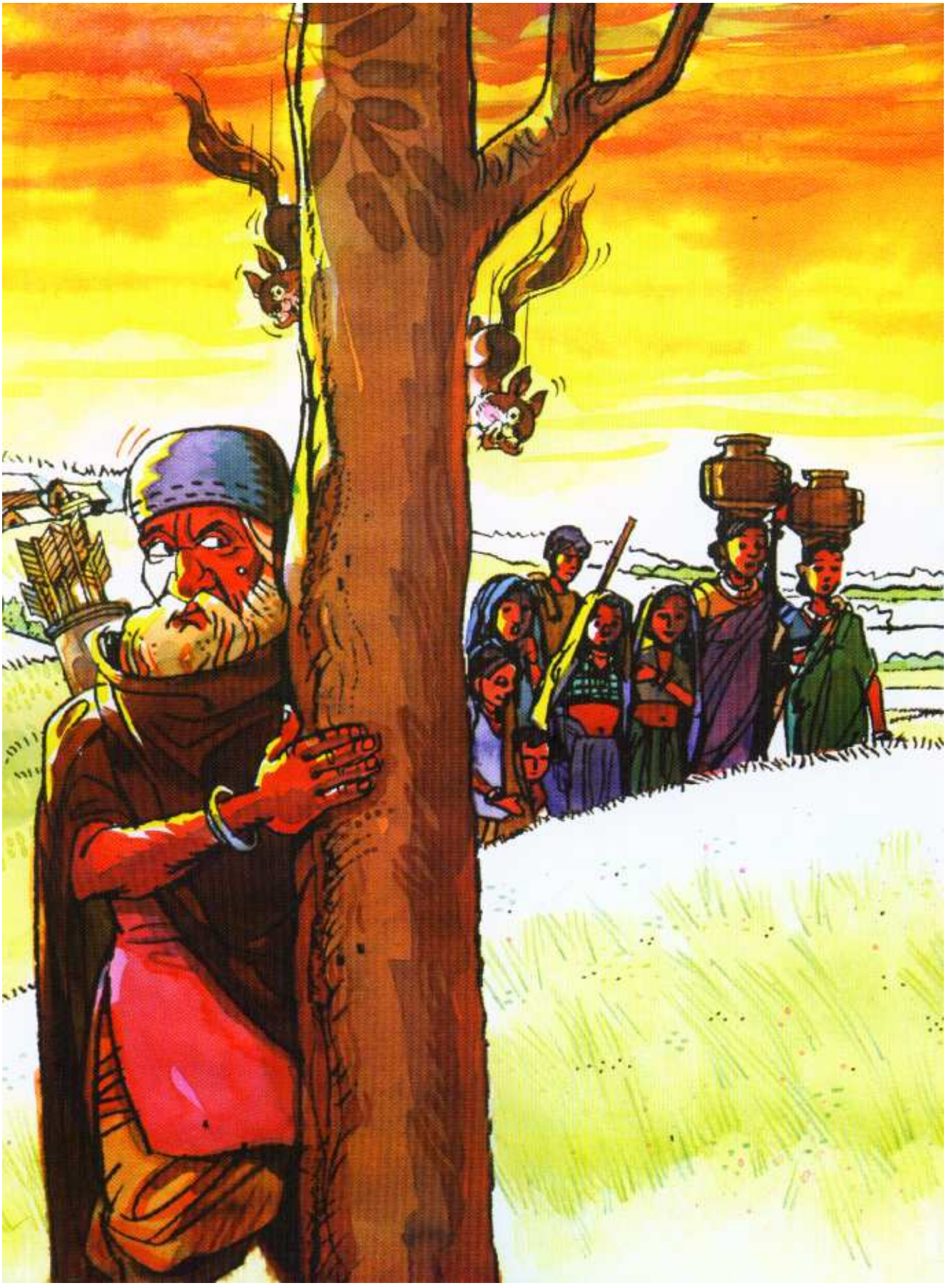
"I know the tiger's cave!" revealed the elephant. "There it is under the banyan tree. Take this hair from my tail for good luck."

Suddenly there was an earth-shattering roar, and the monstrous tiger rushed at them with his claws stretched out.

Maya held out the elephant's hair. She was about to wish that the tiger be tied up in a net, when her eyes fell on the arrow dug in his neck. Blood was dripping from his wound.

Quickly Maya changed her mind and she wished instead that the wound be healed. The hair looped itself and pulled out the arrow. The tiger's pain eased. He lay down at her feet.

"When the hunter shot me, I was mad with pain and anger," he confessed. "I wanted revenge so I carried this boy away from his family. But now I see that human beings are good and can be kind like you! I have changed my mind. Come, I will take you home!" he concluded.



The tiger carried both the children on his back to the village. The village-folk cheered as they saw them arrive.

Maya told the villagers her story. "If we leave the tiger alone, he will not harm us!" She declared.

And, from that day on, the village-folk stopped fearing the tiger.

Printed at : Pushpak Press Pvt. Ltd., 203-204, DSIDC Sheds,
Okhla Industrial Area, Phase-I, New Delhi-20

₹ 35.00 ISBN 978-81-237-5427-7

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